

# Finding the Political Elements in Translations of Mihai Eminescu's "*Luceafarul*"

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## **Abstract**

"Being Romanian is a dreadful thing...what did I do wrong to bear the shame of a nation without history?" asked the eminent philosopher Emil Cioran in the interwar years, horrified at how he is perceived in the French capital, adding that Romania is "a country of ugly, malnourished peasants" (Cioran, Petreu, 98). Cioran's comments reflect the general sentiment of Romanians, who feel embarrassed by being Romanian, which translates into a general shame vis-a-vis Romanian culture. One notable exception is Romania's national poet, Mihai Eminescu, whose poem, "*Luceafarul*", is considered to be one of the greatest works of Romanian literature (Craciun, 9). The poem, although written in 1883, and in modern Romanian, is frequently translated with overly archaic language. When I explored theoretical sources, specifically, Ecco and Bassnett, attempting to address this archaic language, all I found were theories on translating archaic texts into modern language, yet nothing on the reverse. Therefore, I crafted my own argument, which is that the archaic translations attempt to bolster the significance of the poem, "*Luceafarul*". The discrepancy between the original in Romanian and the translations motivated me to produce my own translation, one which escapes the political and nationalistic motivations of translating Eminescu's work as overly archaic and dated.

## **Keywords**

Translation, Romanian, Bassnett, Eco, Failures of translation, Mihai Eminescu

## Introduction

"Being Romanian is a dreadful thing...what did I do wrong to bear the shame of a nation without history?" asked the eminent philosopher Emil Cioran in the interwar years, horrified at how he is perceived in the French capital, where he was completing his dissertation, adding that Romania is "a country of ugly, malnourished peasants" (Cioran, Petreu, 98). Cioran's comments reflect the general sentiment of Romanians, many of which feel shame towards their heritage (Peteu, 96). The history of Romania is a complicated series of political manoeuvres interspersed with nationalist uprisings. With the majority of Romania's history being one of subservience to surrounding countries, it has left many Romanian scholars with adulation for other cultures at the expense of Romanian culture (Peteu, 27). Yet there is one Romanian poet who is considered to be a literary genius within Romania (Maioreescu, 7). That poet is Mihai Eminescu, and it is his most significant poem, "*Luceafarul*", that I will be translating for this paper. To demonstrate how significant *Luceafarul* is for Romanian scholars, I would like to turn to the book *Luceafarul: 1902-1920: Indice Bibliografic Analitic.*, which is a list of all the papers completed on "*Luceafarul*" solely from the years 1902-1920, totalling 349 pages. That's almost 350 pages of titles of papers, dissertations, and books published on "*Luceafarul*" in eighteen years; this enormous amount of research dedicated to "*Luceafarul*" demonstrates its central role in Romanian literature. The reason for this translation is multifaceted; not only do I believe there is value in translating one of the most significant and highly researched pieces of Romanian literature, I am also interested in what gets lost, as well as created, through other translations. My goal in producing this translation is to write a piece that escapes the nationalistic and political elements the other translations propagate through their archaic language, a problem I will be exploring in the next few pages after providing more contextual information on the poet and "*Luceafarul*".

## Contextualizing Information

Eminescu was born in Moldova in 1850. In his 39 years, Eminescu managed to achieve a great deal, becoming Romania's national poet, famed and revered within the country (Craicun, 9). He was an editor, a translator, and a writer not only of poetry, but of plays, satire, short stories, and children's stories. His most famous poem, "*Luceafarul*", was published in 1883. I believe that in order to better

understand the translations, it is essential to know the plot of the poem; otherwise, the few stanzas I've chosen to compare will appear to be out of place and fragmented. The basic plot of the poem is this: there once was a beautiful young princess, beautiful and unique as the moon between stars, and the Virgin amongst women. Every night before she goes to sleep, she leans out on her window sill, and talks to a star, with whom she is in love. This star, named Luceafar, falls in love with her too, and when she asks him to take human form to be with her, he agrees, and, descending from the skies, comes to take her to his celestial abode. She, horrified that he isn't as handsome as she would have wanted him to be, and scared of his immortality, tells him to leave her and to come back only once he has renounced his immortality. Offering her immortality, she refuses it vehemently. The star thinks about it, and decides to become mortal for her. In the meantime, she meets Catalin, a young page who seduces her. She falls for him, and decides to run away with him. In her last conversation with Luceafar, she asks him to light the way for her and Catalin. The poem concludes with Luceafar accepting his immortality and loneliness.

## Other Translations and A Theoretical Approach

One of the things that caught my attention most when I've read translations of Eminescu's "*Luceafarul*" has been the forced archaic language of the translations. I am interested in producing a translation that isn't dated in the style other translations have been. The Romanian original poem is written using modern language; therefore, it is inaccurate to translate it in an archaic manner. Regardless of the date of translation, one constant has been the use of archaic expressions such as "thee" and "thou". Romanian has, for the last several hundred years, been the same, notwithstanding undergoing minor changes due to political reasons in the transition from communism to neo-liberalism; these changes are largely equivalent to a's replacing i's in some words (Petreu, 38). Outside these changes, however, Romanian has remained much the same language.

I found two researchers discussing archaic language in translations; Umberto Eco and Susan Bassnett. However, neither addressed the situation "*Luceafarul*" is in, which is, the original language is not archaic; the target language is instead. In Eco's chapter, Source vs Target, he discusses how he uses the archaic word, *uggiola* in one of his novels; translating it out of Italian into English, he modernizes it, using whimpers (Eco, 92). In Bassnett's chapter, Specific Problems of Literary

Translation, she discusses how Ezra Pound and Charles Kennedy, approach *The Seafarer*, and how they attempt to preserve the temporal context of the original text through using archaic phrasing and language (Bassnett, 100). What Ecco and Bassnett's chapters have in common is they discuss the translation of already archaic word or texts; they do not, and I have not found a theorist who, explore how a modern text can be translated to sound intentionally archaic. I would argue, however, that translating "*Lucefarul*" as archaic speaks to an attempt to bolster its standing in the target language. I make this argument looking not only at the translations, but also at the prefaces.

In his preface and translation, Maiorescu draws attention to Eminescu's personal magnitude, while distancing him from Romanian culture (Maiorescu, 1). The attempt to create a gulf between Eminescu and Romania is, I argue, an attempt to sanitize the poem of negative associations to Romania. For example, Maiorescu writes: "(w)hat Eminescu was, and what he became, was the result of his innate genius which had profound control over him that no personal contact could have diverted him from his natural course in life" (M. 9). If the details of his life don't matter, including personal life, place of birth, or cultural context, then Eminescu is presented as a free-floating, poetic genius. Not only does Maiorescu distance Eminescu from Romania, he also places Eminescu in the West, writing: "(p)ublication is taking place in the poet's absence from the country", as he was in Vienna instead (Maiorescu, 7). Lastly, Maiorescu was sure to legitimize Eminescu's relationship with Western figures, by discussing his close personal relationship with Queen Mary of Romania. Queen Mary, granddaughter of Queen Victoria, was one of the most famous "Romanian" figures in the West; solidifying this relationship with her was most likely a political statement, an attitude important to remember when considering the aims of Maiorescu as a translator.

Although not solely a translation, *Mihai Eminescu: Symposium Dedicated to the 135<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Greatest Romanian Poet*, is a collection of presentations from a symposium held in Iowa in honour of Eminescu. The first line of the introduction is: "From Romania, the country where Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson are very well known, comes a great poet: Mihai Eminescu. We are gathered here to celebrate his genius". (vii). This sets up, from the very beginning of the book, an association between great Western authors and Eminescu is arguably an attempt to domesticate Eminescu, to make him more

comfortable to grasp for a Western audience. This is significant because it demonstrates how the translation of Eminescu is, in this context, an attempt to bolster Romanian culture and make it comfortable for a foreign audience to appreciate it, rather than analyze it on its own terms.

The Symposium text includes a valuable discussion of other translations, specifically, the chapter *Eminescu and German Literature (Eminescu's First German Versions)* by Angela Caracas. Caracas argues that the best translations to be ever completed of "*Luceafarul*" were by German translators in the late 1890s (34). She explains that at the time, Germans were studying Romanian literature extensively, and that there was a fairly even cross-cultural exchange (35). The implication, then, is that for a successful translation, some equal interest between cultures is helpful; in the changing cultural climate, in which America increasingly dominates, this currently doesn't seem to be much of a possibility.

When it comes to the actual translations themselves, I would like to take some time to critically discuss them. Naturally, my own translation will contain problems and twists of phrase that other translations handled more smoothly. However, something I have noticed to be recurrent over the translations I've found has been archaic language and phrasing. As I've decided to translate two sections of "*Luceafarul*", one from the middle of the poem, and one from the end of the poem, these are also the sections from other translations that I am comparing. I have chosen those specific passages because I wanted to pull stanzas that were somewhat similar in their translations. Comparing the three translations to each other, I noticed that some stanzas were greatly different, with some translators taking more creative license than others. As a result, I wanted to find stanzas that were similar to one another, as to not detract attention from the style of language used.

In two of the three translations I am discussing, the title was translated in an inaccurate and overly grandiose manner; I argue that this is one of examples of translations attempting to add weight to the poem. In "Eternal Longing, Impossible Love", *Luceafarul* was translated as "The Legend of the Evening Star". *Luceafarul* is a name; the name of the star who is the protagonist of the poem. Sahlean took a great deal of creative license in titling the poem "Legend of the Evening Star"; specifically, the word 'legend' has connotations of being a longstanding element of Romanian culture. Maiorescu, in his book of translations,

*Mihai Eminescu: Poems*, translated *Lucafarul* as “Lucifer”. Lucifer also bolsters the significance of what is written. Moreover, whenever the poem refers to him, the translator, again, translated him as “Lucifer”. This completely changes the mood of the poem, as this young girl doesn’t fall in love with the devil; she falls in love with a star. The last translation, completed by MacGregor-Hastie, translated the title as “Hyperion”. Hyperion is what the star is called by another celestial being in the poem; as such, I find it to be an appropriate choice.

All of the three translations I am examining in this paper, “The Legend of the Evening Star”, “Lucifer”, and “Hyperion”, use archaic language in their poems. In “The Legend of the Evening Star”, Sahlean translates: “So handsome daemon, as you are / (o)nly in dreams I know, (b)ut to the world that lies afar / I cannot ever go!” (lines 141-144). Although this translation was published in 2007, it uses old turns of phrases such as “I cannot ever go”, which is a sequence of words that wouldn’t be used today. The same stanza is translated by Maiorescu as: “O, beautiful you are, good Sire, / (a)s but a demon prince could be, / But to the course of your desire, / I never shall agree” (lines 141-144). Maiorescu also utilizes an archaic translation, using phrasing such as “as but a demon prince” and “course of your desire”. He also uses “shall”, which is rarely used in modern literature. MacGregor-Hastie translates that same stanza as: “Oh, you are handsome as anyone / shown by the daemons in my dreams, / but the way and the world you offer / can never be for me!” (lines 141-144) This translation wasn’t quite as archaic as the others, but “but the way and the world you offer / can never be for me!” was still a fairly antiquated way of phrasing.

I would like to continue examining the archaic turns of phrase and language utilized by these three translations. In “The Legend of the Evening Star”, Sahlean writes: “And casual, in corner lone, / (h)e takes her by the waist. / ‘What’s it you want? Leave me alone/ (g)o ‘way, your time you waste” (lines 189-192). “In corner lone” is a fairly strange order of words, as is “go ‘way, your time you waste”. Moreover, “way” is one of the many examples of Sahlean shortening words throughout his translation. Maiorescu, in similar fashion, translates: “At which he round her waist did twine, / His arm in sudden wooing. / ‘Behave, you rascal Catalin, / Whatever are you doing?” (lines 189-192) “Wooing” itself is a fairly outdated word, as is “round her waist did twine” an unusual phrasing. MacGregor-Hastie translates that same stanza as thus: “I’ll try my luck with this golden girl! /

And he speaks to her that day. / ‘Oh, what do you want, young Catalin,/ Catalin, go away!’(lines 189-192) “And speaks to her that day” is a fairly unnatural way of saying that he will speak with her.

Corneliu Popescu, commissioner of the second edition of *Mihai Eminescu Poems*, wrote: “Everywhere throughout his works, Eminescu is found to prefer simplicity, clarity and reliance upon his genuinely divine inborn sense of poetic expression to rigid adherence to any limiting metrical form. Everywhere in his poems one is struck by his extreme flexibility in metre.” (17). My translation will be mirroring Eminescu’s flexibility in meter. I think of what Bassnett has to say about the decisions a translator must make; to quote: “Any translator must first decide what constitutes the total structure (i.e.: whether to omit Christian references or not) and then decide on what to do when translating a type of poetry which relies on a series of rules that are non-existent in the TL” (98). Since editors of my paper, as well as classmates after my presentation have expressed interest in this, I would like to clarify; there is no content that is specifically Romanian. In other words, there are no cultural specificities that need to be clarified for the translation; Romanian culture is not part of the total structure of the poem. However, something to note is rhyme scheme, and that is one decision that I had to make. The Romanian original rhymes, as do two of the three English translations I am comparing; yet, I chose not to follow the same pattern with my translation. Romanian, as a language, rhymes easily; as English is not as prone to rhyming, I decided to not make it one of my criterions. Instead, I want to prioritize producing a translation that does not read as archaic, and is as smooth and free-flowing as possible. I believe it has value for the anthology, as many previous translations have “lost” the easiness of the original through the forced archaic language of the translations.

## **My Translation Process**

When producing my own translation, the first thing I did was read through the other already completed translations to chose which sections I wanted to focus on. As I mentioned earlier, the stanzas I chose were because they were fairly similar to one another in content, which meant that focus was not detracted from the language. I then went to the Romanian original and highlighted those stanzas, adding more stanzas from those same sections to ensure that I wasn’t translating just a few stanzas, but rather, a few pages. Although I had already read three

English translations, I tried to not base mine off of theirs; instead, I went through the lines, translating them as simply, and immediately, as I could. I tried to translate without thinking too much about the language, attempting to create a literal translation. By simply, I mean I tried to translate them as closely to the Romanian as possible, without changing the language or the content. Lastly, please note that my translation is split up into two sections. The first section is from the middle of the poem, when *Luceafarul* comes down to earth to speak with the princess. The second section is from the ending of the poem, when the princess asks *Luceafarul* to light her path, and he accepts his immortality.

*Luceafarul*

-“Oh, you’re handsome as only in a dream  
A demon would reveal himself,  
But on the path which you’ve opened  
I will never go!

Your course love  
Burns my heart;  
My eyes are heavy and they ache;  
Your gaze burns all of me.”

“But how would you like me to descend?  
Or, perhaps you don’t understand,  
That I am without death.  
While you, are mortal?”

“I’m not looking for carefully chosen words,  
I wouldn’t even know where to being-  
Even though you speak clearly,  
I cannot understand you;

But if you truly want  
For me to fall in love with you,  
Descend to earth,  
And be mortal like me.”

“You who ask for my life  
In exchange for a kiss



You will know  
How greatly I love you;

Yes, I'll be born of sin,  
Living by another law;  
To eternity I am bound;  
These chains I will undo."

And so he went  
Out of love for a girl,  
Ripping himself from the heavens,  
Losing many, countless, days.

In this time, Catalin,  
Sly child of the palace,  
Who fills cups of wine,  
At dinner for his wage

A page who follows the royal family,  
Their gowns to carry,  
Boy born out of wedlock  
But with bold eyes,

And rosy cheeks,  
Full of life,  
Sneaks up to where she is;  
He gazes at Catalina.

But how beautiful she's become,  
And how proud;  
He, Catalin, steals to where she stands,  
To try his luck.

And, passing smoothly,  
Takes her by the waist.  
"What do you want, Catalin?  
Leave, and mind after yourself."

Second Section

She, drunk with love,  
Raises her eyes. Seeing  
Luceafarul above  
She trusts to him her wish:

Descend to me, gentle Lucefar,  
Gliding on a moonbeam,  
Come to the forest, light my mind,  
Light my path!

He trembles like the other times,  
In forests and on hills;  
His light guiding solitudes,  
And breaking on great waves.

But he doesn't descend as he used to  
From seas below;  
What do you care, fair figure of clay,  
If it be me or any other?

Living your constrained lives,  
It is luck that guides you,  
Yet I, in my world feel,  
Undying and cold.

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